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ABSTRACT

The initiation and development of the Queens English Project, a cooperative program between Queens College (New York) and five area high schools that produced a reading/writing curriculum from the junior year of high school through the freshman year of college, is described in this paper. Discussed are the educational principles on which the project is based, the cooperative efforts of college and high school faculty, the training seminars for project personnel, the methods used to teach composition (of the fable, parable, and essay), the organization of reading/writing labs in selected high schools, and the prospects for continuing the high school labs after the project ends. (AEA)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGE: A DESCRIPTION OF A PROJECT THAT WORKED

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MIDDLE SCHOOL HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGE: A DESCRIPTION OF A PROJECT THAT WORKED

In his latest book on education, Teaching as a Conserving Activity, Neil Postman tells us that he now believes in the thermostatic theory of education. By this metaphor, he means that education, particularly education offered in schools, should have as its mission the business of balance, balancing the curriculum of the school with the curriculum of the culture existing outside the school. He proposes that if the society is loose and chaotic, schools must be tight and orderly. If the society is tight and orderly, schools must teach children to be loose and exploratory. I don't know whether Dr. Postman would agree with my paraphrase of his idea, nor do I know whether I accept his premise, but I realize that those of us who created the Queens English Project were probably unconsciously reacting to some of the developments in education which prompted Dr. Postman's new thesis: we felt that students, whether they are in middle or senior high school, are not writing or reading as well as academics think they should and therefore will not be able to profit as fully as they might from a good liberal arts, college education. Though basic, that is one of the reasons that the Queens English Project came into being. But I am getting ahead of the story.

The Queens English Project developed from a number of seemingly unrelated incidents and included the thought and energy of a variety of professionals. One part of the story began when two teachers met over a cup of tea in a high school faculty cafeteria. One of those teachers was George Cohn, chairman of the English Department at John Bowne High School, I was the other teacher. I was supervising a student teacher in his department. He was conferring with me on the student's progress. We discussed lesson plans and student teacher preparation. At one point, George digressed for a moment asking me about the Queens College English Placement Test. A gentle man normally, George sounded almost hostile when he mentioned the test.

"Why do so many of our good students get placed in the basic English course?" he asked. "What criteria does your English Department use to place students?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out," I replied.

"How will you do that?" he asked.

"I'll go to the English Department. Better still, why don't I set up an appointment for you with some of the people in the English Department and you can ask them yourself."

"No, we tried that before. Your English Department faculty met with us a few years back and blamed us for the poor quality of high school students. They were haughty and rude to us. They obviously looked down on the English teachers in the high schools."

I was not shocked, but I was embarrassed. As a former teacher in the public high schools, I understood what he was saying. The college teachers blamed the high school teachers for failing to teach students what they needed to know in college. The high school teachers blamed middle school teachers for their failure to produce skillful students for high school, and middle school teachers sneered at the inability of the elementary school teachers to do their job. The elementary school teachers accused parents and society for the fact that their students could not and would not master skills they perceived as important. We've all heard the story many times before--it is the old buck passing technique which is embarrassing and leads to demoralization and powerless antagonism among teachers and helpless students. I insisted this would not happen if he was willing to set up the meeting. We agreed that we shared students and responsibility to them, for many of the students who were in George's high school would ultimately attend Queens. His students were ours.

In deciding to hold the meeting, we also agreed that blame and hostility were unproductive. Talking to eachother rather than at each other might serve a useful purpose. We made a deal. We decided to invite all the high school chairmen in Queens County (20 of them) to meet with 20 members of the college

faculty--10 from the Department of Secondary Education and 10 from the Department of English--to discuss the placement test and teacher preparation. The meeting would be held at the college. We would carefully explain the purpose of the meeting and set up ground rules in advance. The rules were: 1. polite, tea party behavior 2. questions and answers but no blame 3. tea and cookies for refreshment.

These simple plans worked. The meeting was perhaps cautious but was also polite. The atmosphere at the end of that first meeting was somewhat subdued, but the group felt that it was successful and that we still had a number of items we wanted to discuss, and someone suggested that we meet again in a month. George and I breathed deeply. We were pleased with what we had done, and we suggested that the group elect a chairman for future meetings. They did. It was decided that the chairmanship should be joint, one person from the high schools and one from the college. George and I were elected. That was the beginning of an 8 year association called Common Concerns of English Educators. It was also, though we didn't know it at the time, one major step toward the beginning of the Queens English Project. For the next 5 years, Common Concerns met almost monthly. At these meetings, we discussed how we teach composition, how we teach reading and literature, the problems that teachers in high school have in motivating students to do the tasks we discussed, the disillusionment of the teachers, the successes we had with students. The discussions were always lively, but, after meeting for 5 years, we began to think that there was more to do. We had shared educational theories, but now we wondered about putting them into practice. We wanted to change curriculum, write syllabi, test our ideas, but these take time and money--two of the scarcest items available to school teachers. One memorable afternoon, someone suggested a solution, that we apply for a grant. Now we knew that if funded, our talks were going to be tested. Some of us wondered, "Could we dare go beyond theory and sometimes hot air into practice?" We decided to take the risk. We had moved the thermostat of our relationship up from cold to warm. We had learned respect and trust for each other. High school and college

professionals saw themselves as equal members of one professional group. We could share in stoking the furnace of education.

At the same time, back in the classrooms of Queens College, another part of the story was unfolding. The college, faced by the Open Admissions policy, which gave us a small, but for Queens, unusually underprepared group of students, recognized the need to create a new curriculum to prepare the underprepared for the heavy demands of a high powered, liberal arts college. The English Department worked to develop a series of syllabi which addressed the needs of students who had not written much before college and lacked skill and fluidity in their writing. One of these syllabi was created by Marie Ponsot. Initially addressed to writing, one summer she devised a syllabus and taught a course that included both reading and writing--called Total Immersion. This course, limited to 32 incoming freshmen who would have been assigned to a prefreshman writing course and a course in reading, is the one that we have used in the Queens English Project. Marie believes in 6 principles which underlie that syllabus.

1. Prolific writing and prolific reading improves those skills.
2. Writers support abstract ideas with concrete examples. Abstractions tie concrete examples together.
3. Writers need to observe and make inferences based on their observations.
4. Writers and readers have to consider the structure of the whole piece in relation to its parts.
5. Writers need to learn how to rewrite and revise. Elegant sentences are created through thought and revision.
6. Writers need to have authority over their own writing. In other words, they should choose what they want to say and how they want to say it.

Students write more and read more enthusiastically and effectively if they are told what is correct about their work rather than being told what is wrong with it. We all know what happens when we want to avoid errors-we constrain our attempts to only those things we know we have mastered. The result in writing is simple sentences and simple vocabulary.

In the summer of '75, we tested Marie's ideas on the 32 students mentioned before. We learned a lot. Some of what we learned was predictable; some caught us happily by surprise. First, we found that students who would normally cut classes and hated to write and read were attending class; there was a total of 5 absences for the entire 6 weeks of the program. Although most students wrote a paragraph at most at the beginning of the summer in fifty minutes, at the end of the summer, they were filling a blue book. Students who claimed that they had never read an entire book were reading one book per week. Since these students were in transition from high school to college, we were pleased with the response. We questioned where the program had gone right, and how could we capitalize on this "rightness." We decided that what we considered a minor success probably stemmed from a number of causes: first, the halo effect of just being in college; second, the fact that the course met in the late afternoon and evening and was a definite departure from the high school schedule; third, and probably most important, the class was conducted by a professional, who was supported by tutors and team teachers and a mystery correspondent, a member of the Department of English, who weekly responded to student letters without meeting the group until the last session; and fourth, the syllabus was directed to both group and individual needs and was completely centered on the process of reading and writing, with the major time in class spent on reading and writing instead of talking about reading and writing either by the students or the instructor. Now, I should tell you that we tried to be objective and scientific about the study. We accepted reports from students and tutors, but we also tested the students, giving them pre and post tests in reading and writing in order to respond to the complaints of colleagues who believe that test scores tell you about progress. We found no significant gain on the IOWA test of silent reading skills from the first week to the last. Since that was not one of our expected outcomes, we were neither surprised nor disappointed. We studied the written responses of students and foud that, although they still made errors in grammar and puctuation, they were writing longer and more complicated sentences. In other words, as

Mina Shaughnessy noted in Errors and Expectations, students were beginning to take risks; taking these risks made errors predictable.

The success of this program in terms of student participation and production lead us to discuss it in detail with our colleagues in the high schools, and, when we finally sat down to write our grant, it was agreed that we would use the Total Immersion Syllabus as one component of our grant. In the grant which we wrote for FIPSE, we limited our work to 5 of the 20 high schools in Queens and Queens College. We picked the 5 high schools using two criteria: 1. high schools that sent Queens College the largest number of students 2. those chairmen who had worked most closely with the college in Common Concerns. We proposed to write an articulated curriculum from junior year of high school through freshman year of college. Our goal was to prepare the high school students so that they could enroll in our freshman English course and would not have to enroll in the basic English course or in a reading course. We hoped that this preparation would allow students to enjoy the benefits of a strong liberal arts education.

In order to offer the education that we thought was necessary, we decided to hold weekly seminars for the teachers, chairmen, college faculty, and lab coordinators who would be placed in the schools. The seminars in the first year consisted of going through the syllabus created by Marie Ponsot. Beginning with the fable of the oral tradition, we could learn to deal with whole structures--the structure of the fable--a two part structure, the narrative serving as the concrete part of the whole and the moral or aphorism as the abstract. Marie suggested that the fable is a familiar form to us all. She therefore began by asking everyone to learn how to punctuate the dialogue. She set the scene for the fable. "It was a warm summer night. A Bear and an Elephant were walking down the road. What does the Bear say to the Elephant? What does the Elephant say to the Bear?" She repeated this two times and then said, "There is a natural but frightening phenomenon, a storm or an earthquake. Describe the phenomenon. Now what does the Bear say to the Elephant? What does the Elephant say to the Bear? Now, turn your paper over and write, 'The moral of the story is....' Write two or three morals, and

try to make them sound elegant." This activity took about fifteen minutes. At the end of the fifteen minutes, Marie broke the group into small groups of four or five. Each person in each group read his or her fable to the others. After each fable was read, two minutes were devoted to writing observations on the fable. Observations are reports of facts. They can include a paraphrase of the narrative and moral; they can include an examination of the language and sentence structure; they can include a description of the use of dialogue; they can include an analysis of the moral and from whose point of view it is expressed; they cannot include judgements and inferences. After these observations are written, they are each read to the group. This allows the group to hear what others have observed, and it increases the powers of observation for each member of the group. The activity further encourages more reading and more writing.

After a number of weeks work on the fable, the group moved to writing the family parable. The parable, another form of writing which includes the statement of a lesson, began with a family story but ultimately moved from the personal story to the expository essay, or at least one form of that essay. As with the fable, students wrote, read, and observed their own and the work of others. By this time, the observations became more sophisticated. "I notice that you begin most of your sentences with the word 'so'," reported one student. "I notice that the words'itchy'and'squeamish'convey anxiety," uttered another student. Students began to examine their own use of language and the transitions from one idea to another.

After working on the parable for a few weeks, students moved to an examination of the abstract ideas which underly the parable. They chose one character and made a list of adjectives that described that character. Then, they took one of those adjectives, turned it into a noun, and wrote a paragraph defining the noun. Loving becomes love, and the student explains his or her view on love. This paragraph is then put at the head of the parable to serve as an introductory paragraph. Later, a concluding paragraph was written to frame the essay. The last paragraph was a generalization. The students(in this case, the class of professionals)

learned one form of the essay.

In addition to the syllabus, we decided to establish in the high schools a successful part of our basic skills program from the college. This is a two pronged program which includes team teachers and tutors. What we did was to set up reading-writing labs in each high school. The labs are staffed by a graduate student, lab coordinator, and 7 trained tutors. Although at Queens the students use the labs during their free time, we learned rather quickly that this was not possible in the high schools. Due to over crowding and tight schedules, students had to be scheduled for lab during school hours. We were all worried about how this would work, for it meant pulling students out of English class to go to the lab. Despite our worries, it seems to work well. Students are assigned to tutors on an individual basis or, at the most, two students to a tutor. They get one hour of tutoring per week with an undergraduate college tutor. The high school students seem to enjoy the attention and work continuously during their hour in the lab. They may work on a fable; they may work on grammar or punctuation; they may work at getting started on a history paper. Whatever they do, the lab is treated seriously, and the students usually work individually. Sometimes, however, they follow the work of the classroom, for the lab allows teachers to split their groups in half,16 in the lab and 16 in the classroom.This encourages all students to participate in the class work.

When we first started this project, I privately worried, and so did my friend George Cohn, that the college was once again going into the schools to hand down a formula for success and that the project would lack the collaboration we had envisioned. I also worried that when the funding was over, everything would stop, and we would all go back to doing what we had done before. Both fears now seem less well founded. For we have worked closely together to rewrite the curriculum and to include in it more reading activities that require published materials. For example, as the students read and write their own parables, they are also reading Steinbeck's The Pearl or Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea; they use the technique of observation in reading these books just as they did in working with the writing of

an accepted author. Our colleagues in the schools have taught us this. We have also learned that in three of the five schools the principals have begun to make plans for keeping the labs after the grant ends. They are going to release one teacher to run the lab, and they are going to make a special English class in which they will train high school students so that they can serve as tutors.

The project is not complete, and we cannot give you any statistics to speak of concerning the quantitative success or failure of the program, but I can tell you that students report that they are doing much more writing than they have done in previous English classes. They enjoy their lab sessions and complain if they do not get the opportunity to read their work to other students or their tutors. They have learned to enjoy the comments offered by tutors and peers. The teachers, though over worked, are anxious to share student writing with us and with eachother. They are writing position papers on the principles and how these principles may be taught.

Perhaps as a group we are proving Postman's theory of balance in a slightly altered way. We are balancing the knowledge of the high schools with the knowledge of the college and both of these against the need for better writers and readers--a more literate and consciously educated society.